

# **How to be a Cardio-Smart Kid**

Here are four major steps that can make a difference in helping to prevent heart disease.

## ***1. Stay away from cigarettes and tobacco smoke.***

The AHA reports that cigarette smoking is the most important preventable cause of premature death in the United States. It accounts for more than 440, 000 of the more than 2.4 million annual deaths, and contributes to the development of a number of chronic diseases, including atherosclerosis (clogged arteries). In a separate report, the AHA describes cigarette smoking by children as a major public health problem which, if not controlled, will be a major risk factor for coronary heart disease later in life.

The AHA's "Heart Power"!, a curriculum-based program for teaching about the heart and how to keep it healthy for a lifetime, children can learn the benefits of remaining tobacco free for life.

## ***2. Watch cholesterol intake.***

Most health-conscious Americans know that high cholesterol is a leading risk factor for coronary heart disease. However, many people may not know what cholesterol is, what it does or even how to control cholesterol levels. Cholesterol is a waxy substance made by the liver and also supplied in the diet through animal products such as meats, poultry, fish and dairy products. Cholesterol is needed (in the body) to insulate nerves, make cell membranes and produce certain hormones. However, the body makes enough cholesterol, so any dietary cholesterol isn't needed.

A high level of cholesterol in the blood is a leading risk factor for coronary heart disease. When there is too much cholesterol in your blood, the cholesterol and other substances build up in the walls of your arteries. This build up is called plaque. Over time, it causes "hardening of the arteries" so that arteries become narrowed and blood flow to the heart is slowed down. The blood carries oxygen to the heart, and if enough blood and oxygen cannot reach your heart, you may suffer chest pain. If the blood supply to a portion of the heart is completely cut off by a blockage, the result is a heart attack. Heart attacks most commonly occur when plaques become fragile and rupture. Then blood clots are formed and can completely cut off blood supply to a portion of the heart.

"Heart Power!" teaches children as young as pre-Kindergarten, the importance of good nutrition, and how to make "heart healthy" food choices.

### ***3. Keep blood pressure in check.***

Blood pressure is the force, or pressure, exerted by the heart in pumping blood. High blood pressure (greater than 140/90) directly increases the risk of coronary heart disease (which leads to heart attack) and stroke, especially along with other risk factors.

High blood pressure is particularly prevalent in African Americans, middle-aged and elderly people, obese people, heavy drinkers and women who are taking birth control pills. It may run in families, but many people with a strong family history of high blood pressure never have it. People with diabetes mellitus, gout or kidney disease are more likely to have high blood pressure, too.

According to an AHA estimate, one in four U.S. adults has high blood pressure (hypertension), but because there are no symptoms, nearly one-third of these people don't know they have it. In fact, people may have high blood pressure for years without knowing it. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure or kidney failure. This is why high blood pressure has earned the name the "silent killer." The only way to tell if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked.

While high blood pressure is more common in people over age 35, it can occur in either can occur in children or adults. Research scientists don't know why some children have higher blood pressure than others. Children who are overweight usually have higher blood pressure. Some children inherit the tendency toward higher blood pressure from one or both parents. High blood pressure is more frequent and more severe in families of African Americans than in whites. The reasons aren't fully understood.

A special diet and regular physical activity may be prescribed by the doctor to lower high blood pressure in overweight children. The doctor may also prescribe medication if diet and regular physical activity don't bring the high blood pressure under control. The American Heart Association recommends that all children have yearly blood pressure measurements. Detecting high blood pressure early will improve a child's health.

### ***4. Stay physically active.***

Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for developing coronary artery disease. It also increases the risk of stroke and such other major cardiovascular risk factors as obesity, high blood pressure, low HDL ("good") cholesterol and diabetes. The AHA recommends that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement on physical activity in schools, a primary goal of activity programs for youth is to promote physically active lifestyles that will be carried into adulthood and reduce health problems related to inactivity.

Many parents may question how they can promote physical activity in their children. Some suggestions include:

- Limit television, movies, videos and computer games to less than two hours a day. Substitute the rest of leisure time with physical activity.
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- Physical activity should be fun for children and adolescents. Plan family outings and vacations that involve vigorous activities such as hiking, bicycling, skiing, swimming, etc.
- Parents should try to be role models for active lifestyles and provide children with opportunities for increased physical activity. Stay involved in your child's physical education classes at school. At daycare, make sure the kids exercise at least 20 minutes a day. Ask about frequency of classes and activity, class size, curriculum (instruction in lifetime fitness activities as well as team sports should be emphasized), physical fitness assessments, qualifications of the teacher (should hold appropriate certification in physical education and be an appropriate role model for students). Physical fitness should be measured at the beginning and end of each year, and goals should be established for each child. Encourage your school board
- Other suggestions for increasing physical activity can be found by visiting the American Heart Association's website at [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).

Some risk factors for coronary heart disease, like age, heredity, gender, can't be changed. Others, such as the four discussed here, can. By introducing children to healthy habits and choices, you can help them reduce their risk of developing heart or cardiovascular disease, and improve the quality of their life for many years.

Adapted from the American Heart Association ([www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)) and American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org))